

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation

By Craig Bihrlé

“This model of conservation, simply put, is the best single effort to conserve and manage wildlife in perpetuity that the world has ever seen.”

– Shane Mahoney, narrating
“Opportunity for All,” produced by
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Driving home from duty at a moose check station last October, Game and Fish Department big game biologist Bill Jensen couldn't help but marvel at how well the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation works in North Dakota.

During his three days stationed at the North Dakota Forest Service office in Bottineau, inspecting and measuring moose brought in by successful hunters from units M4, M8 and M9, Jensen interacted with the following:

- A hunter with disabilities from New Town.
- A Bottineau area landowner.
- A nurse from Mandan.
- A 78-year-old from Belcourt.
- A 14-year-old from Powers Lake.
- A retiree from Garrison.
- A math teacher from Bottineau.

Collectively, these 2006 moose hunters are a defining example of Principle 3 of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which states:

Allocation of Wildlife by Law: *Every citizen in good standing – regardless of wealth, social standing or land ownership – is allowed to participate in the harvest of wildlife within guidelines set by lawmakers.*

This is in direct contrast to hunting opportunities in much of the rest of the world where simple citizenship is not enough. In North Dakota, where moose and other big game licenses are highly coveted, most everyone who meets the minimum requirements for age and hunter education certification can participate in reasonably priced lottery drawings.

Pronghorn are just one of several North Dakota big game species that have prospered under the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation concept that all people have access to wildlife, and therefore all citizens have a stake, and a say, in species management.



Fees for hunting licenses are set by the state legislature, and to this point lawmakers have resisted attempts to raise some big game license fees to a point where some people could no longer afford to participate in lottery drawings.

Allocation of wildlife by law, Mahoney stated in "Opportunity for All," "Not only safeguarded against the rise of the special elite who would appropriate wildlife to themselves – a return to a hated European tradition – it also democratized an involvement with nature."

Besides Principle 3, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation includes six other tenets. Many of these concepts have existed in various forms for more than a century, but only in recent years have wildlife organizations and individuals more officially defined the principles.

"We live under its tenets, we almost always have," says North Dakota Game and Fish Director Terry Steinwand. "In fact, it is stated as general guidance in our strategic plan. Calling it the North American Model just adds some consistency to the principles we've always promoted, and Game and Fish will follow these as we move forward."

The other six principles include:

Wildlife as a Public Trust Resource

In North America, no one owns wildlife, and everyone owns wildlife, based on the public trust doctrine. Most states also have laws like North Dakota's century code, which states, "The ownership of and title to all wildlife within this state is in the state for the purpose of regulating the enjoyment, use, possession, disposition, and conservation thereof, and for maintaining action for damages as herein provided."

And because wildlife is a public resource, everyone has access to it, and everyone has a say in how it is managed.

Elimination of Markets for Wildlife

As the United States and Canada evolved as countries, people generally killed wildlife for one of two purposes – either to eat or to sell. The market hunters who killed wildlife for profit were largely responsible for the rapid demise of some kinds of birds, furbearers and especially big game animals. Early conservationists encouraged laws that not only limited taking of wildlife, including fish, but also outlawed most selling of wildlife even if it was taken legitimately.

The elimination of trafficking dead animals is one of the most important policies of wildlife conservation.



Wildlife Can Only be Killed for Legitimate Purposes

Hunting, fishing and trapping seasons are designed to allow public access to surplus wildlife, but only in a manner that involves fair chase and allows for sustainable populations. Wanton waste laws oblige all hunters to properly use legally taken animals.



The killing and selling of wildlife for profit was responsible for the demise of many species. Encouraged by citizen conservationists, governments eventually eliminated markets for wildlife and established regulations to limit personal take, which provided the groundwork for populations to recover.

Wildlife is Considered an International Resource

This policy is basic to international wildlife treaties, and requires all federal, provincial, and state jurisdictions affected to cooperate in management. The Migratory Bird Protection Act of 1916 between the United States, Canada and Mexico is an exceptional example of how governments can recognize a cooperative responsibility and work together to maintain the public trust in resources that may migrate or move between countries.

Science is the Proper Tool for Developing Wildlife Management and Policy

The British Columbia Wildlife Federation describes science as “by and large our best tool to formulate appropriate management and policy options, because it is based on a

disinterested pursuit of understanding. It stands apart from political considerations and favors a hands-off policy by elected representatives. This policy assures that public wildlife is in the hands of exceedingly well educated individuals and that it is scrutinized continuously.”

Democracy of Hunting

Today, in the United States and Canada, most every citizen has the right to participate in hunting. This opportunity provides a stake in wildlife conservation and management for everyone. Because of that stake, hunters and anglers have contributed billions of dollars over the last century to conservation and management efforts that have restored and enhanced many wildlife populations.

North American Model Future

“This model today,” as Mahoney narrated in “Opportunity for All,” “is responsible for the extraordinary diversity of wildlife that we see on this continent,” but it is not without challenges.

The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (now called the Association for Fish and Wildlife Agencies), of which the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is a member, approved a position statement in 2002 that recognizes and supports the seven components of the North American Model.

The statement outlines that “... the first three components are in danger of being eroded by various actions that have led to increasing privatization of wildlife. In the past two decades or so, interest in owning wildlife for pets has grown, as has domestication of species for ranching, hunting or agricultural purposes. Wild animals, intentionally or otherwise confined within high fences, are increasingly claimed as private property.”

AFWA and its member state agencies support the statement that “The keystone of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is the principle that wildlife are owned by no one and are to be held in trust for the benefit of all people by government.”

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department strongly supports AFWA’s position, and in the future will emphasize efforts to promote and support the seven principles of the North American Model.

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department’s communications supervisor.

Model Talk

"That our natural resources belong to all of us collectively is the key concept that makes the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation an unparalleled success."

– Richard Leopold, Director,
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

"Today we are the inheritors of a system of wildlife conservation unequaled throughout the world. It not only rescued species from certain oblivion, it also created a network of laws, industries and partnerships that give wildlife a fighting chance in the future. Founded on the principles of wise use of resources and democracy of access, the North American Wildlife Conservation Model has achieved for us what we would wish for all nations; namely, that human traditions might be perpetuated in a natural world that is both sustaining and sustainable."

– Shane Mahoney,
writing for "Bugle," the magazine of the
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

"Unlike many other conservation models applied elsewhere in the world, hunting in the U.S. and Canada has remained open to all citizens regardless of class, and hunting has become central to the success of the Model."

– Position Statement,
The Wildlife Society

Theodore Roosevelt's insistence that the common man have access to wildlife and hunting eventually became one of the primary tenets of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

NORTH AMERICAN MODEL OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
Best effort to conserve and manage wildlife that the world has ever seen.

- Wildlife is Held in Public Trust
- Eliminating Commerce in Dead Wildlife
- Allocating Wildlife Use Through Law
- Hunting Opportunity for All
- Wildlife May be Killed Only for Legitimate Reasons
- Wildlife is an International Resource
- Science is the Basis for Wildlife Policy

"The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value." — Theodore Roosevelt